

Stubton looks to the future

It's been one rollercoaster of a year for American couple Kent and Claire Brainerd – but they have managed to hold onto their dream of turning a former county boarding school into something very special.



SOUTH VIEW OF STUBTON HALL, WITH CANAL

As the New Year beckons they are starting to feel that they have turned a corner after being forced to rethink their original plans for Stubton Hall, a fabulous country mansion, with adjacent buildings, which stands in twenty-two acres of parkland.

Kent and Claire first spotted this, largely nineteenth century property at Stubton – on the borders of Lincolnshire and Nottinghamshire – more than three years ago. They immediately fell under its spell and splashed out £1.9 million to get the keys.

Their dream was (and still is!) to create a magnificent country house hotel, complete with a top class spa, to rival anything else in the UK.

Then came economic turmoil and the 'credit crunch' with its horrendous knock-on effects, which were magnified many times over for investors and developers with major projects underway.

With their bankers calling the tune, Kent and Claire realised something had to give.

"It was really depressing, but we decided to cut our



THE GRAND STAIRCASE



THE BRIDAL SUITE

cloth and create a really special wedding venue, which includes our Music Room, which is ideal for ceremonies, our newly-built Orangery - which can cater for 200 guests - and also fifteen guest bedrooms," said Claire.

"Ultimately, it is our partly-finished Spa and our plans to create a further twenty-five guest bedrooms that has had to be put onto the back burner, although we still want to complete this at some point in the future."

Kent and Claire finally welcomed Stubton's first wedding guests in July, but even before they reached this landmark,

this determined couple realised they could do with a liberal helping of expert advice.

And that is why Kent, a music producer and former member of the chart-topping band Drum Theatre, decided to open Stubton – and their hearts – on the Ruth Watson Hotel Rescue Show.

It was a scary moment, made even scarier when Kent revealed that they had spent at least £6m on their once-in-a-lifetime purchase (the Hall) and the renovations which they have lovingly carried out so far.

Kent, in particular, took a verbal battering from the hotel 'inspector', but straight-talking Ruth also offered the couple a wealth of hot tips and, in order to attract a much wider clientele to Stubton Hall, they are following some of her advice.

"We are now starting to offer luxury bed-and-breakfast breaks and I am compiling a list of lots of other ideas, whereby we may start hosting cultural and educational events in the future," said Claire.

Kent and Claire, who have a daughter Georgina (7), share a wealth of interests, including history, art, architecture and antiques – and Stubton provides the perfect backdrop for them to indulge these passions.

"I've been looking into the story of Stubton so far and uncovered some fascinating facts.

Ironically, these also reveal that its previous owners had their fair share of challenges. They also used Stubton in some very interesting ways," said Claire.

Perhaps the most poignant record is Sir Robert Heron's admission, in his diaries, that Stubton was also a huge drain on his finances.

The estate at Stubton had been in the Heron family since 1789 and was inherited by Sir Robert, from his uncle Sir Richard, in 1805. It was initially the perfect place for summer visits.

But after being elected an MP in 1812, Sir Robert (who served for thirty-five years as the representative for Grimsby and later Peterborough) decided it should be his main home.

"In his diary of April 1813, he reveals that he initially wanted to remodel the existing house. A plan had been agreed on with Jeffry (correct) Wyatt, a fashionable architect who was known for his alterations to older houses and for new country houses built in a picturesque or classical style," said Claire.

"However when they started to put that plan into action, they discovered that the property was in such a ruinous state, they had to revisit their original ideas. After three days of deliberations they finally decided on the best way forward."

Records suggest that Wyatt, who was later commissioned to remodel the outside and inside of Windsor Castle for King George IV, kept at least some of the seventeenth century house at Stubton, especially its service wing.

In the end he designed a restrained, classical style building, similar to Wolley Park in Berkshire, which he had remodelled in about 1799.

"Heron's diary of January 1814 interestingly records the lament of many a housebuilder at that time, when he comments on the "enormous expense of building"

Meet Claire *and* Kent

Claire Brainerd (45) was born in Chicago and studied at Georgetown University in Washington DC. She spent a term in Florence, Italy, where she developed a love of Italian food and culture. After graduation, Claire moved to London in 1986, to study for her MA in the history of art, at The Courtauld Institute. It was at this time that she met Kent.

Claire went on to achieve her doctorate (D.Phil) from Oxford University. Today she is an acknowledged expert on Italian Renaissance drawings and she has lectured in Britain, the United States and Italy. This busy mum of Georgina, has also written three books on Italian Renaissance Drawings, for the British Museum, under her maiden name, Claire Van Cleave.

Kent Brainerd (49) grew up in California and Chicago and moved to London in 1984. Passionate about music, he formed the band Drum Theatre, which was signed to CBS Records for what was a record-breaking fee at that time.

The band enjoyed great success in Japan, Sweden and Italy (where they had a number one hit), but only made it to 41 in the UK charts with Eldorado, from its album Everyman. After the band broke up, Kent set up Jamestown Studios in Whitechapel, London, which grew to comprise twenty-three recording studios, while also penning tracks for advertisements and corporate videos.

Claire and Kent moved to Lincolnshire in the late 1990s.



KENT AND CLAIRE BRAINERD

and reveals that in the previous January he had spent £7,000, with the result that his property was “covered in”, but that was all,” said Claire.

“As well as adding a conservatory to Stubton, Heron was also known for keeping a large menagerie and he boasted of his success in breeding exotic animals such as llamas, alpacas, lemurs, porcupines, armadillos and kangaroo,” said Claire.

Sir Robert and his wife, Amelia, had no children. Amelia was the grand-daughter of Baptist Noel, Earl of Gloucester and so was related to the Nevilles of Wellingore. When Robert died in 1854, the estate, including large sections of land in Stubton and Claypole passed to Amelia’s relation George Nevile.

Kent takes up Stubton’s story, revealing that George Nevile, who lived in the hall, may have made further alterations but no record of these has been found so far.

“After his death Stubton passed to Sir Ralph Henry Sacheverel Wilmont, although it wasn’t his main home. When he passed away the property was put up for sale and bought by Sir Edmund Royds,” said Kent.

“Like Heron, he was another MP. Sir Edmund represented Sleaford and at one time was also High Sheriff of Lincolnshire and a Deputy Lord Lieutenant. Sir Edmund instigated a big programme of repairs and alterations to the Hall.”

When he was aged 81, Sir Edmund tried, unsuccessfully, to sell Stubton. It was still unsold in 1946 when he died and it then passed into the hands of Lincolnshire County Council to be turned into a school.

“That led to many more alterations and, in the process, historical details became hidden or were removed,” said Kent.

Stubton Hall has clearly benefited from the spirit of enterprise down the centuries, as various owners have put their personal stamp on this truly impressive property. History also reveals that, like Kent and Claire, its previous owners have had to dig deep to keep Stubton in good shape.

“When we bought it, we saw Stubton as a sleeping beauty and we wanted to be the ones to breathe new life into her. It has been really tough going at times, but this is such a fantastic place with such amazing potential, we are eager to press on with our transformation plans,” said Kent.

If enthusiasm and sheer hard work can turn dreams into reality, then there are many more chapters to come in Stubton’s fascinating life-story and Claire and Kent are determined they are going to be the ones who ‘write’ them.

THE SPA AREA (AS YET UNFINISHED) AND THE ORANGERY

